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The death of his mother prompted Rufus Wainwright to throw himself into writing a new album, writes **Sally Browne**

RUFUS Wainwright has lived a life of colour and drama on and off the stage.

From growing up in Montreal under the care of his folk singer mother and often absent but always entertaining singer-songwriter father to coming out at age 14; from getting plenty of adulation as a young performer to almost going blind due to a crystal meth addiction; to recreating Judy Garland's live show on stage, to writing his own opera, to finding love; for his 37 years, Rufus has lived a full life.

This year, he was dealt a blow when his beloved mother, Canadian folk singer Kate McGarrigle, died from the rare tissue cancer sarcoma in January.

Rufus's answer was to throw himself into his work – he continued touring, released an album, and performed a special tribute show to his mother with family and friends.

The concert in London featured artists including Nick Cave, Emmylou Harris, Teddy and Richard Thompson, Rufus's sister and fellow songwriter Martha Wainwright and their aunt Anna McGarrigle, Kate's songwriting partner. The event earned six five-star reviews.

"It was just an amazing show,"

says Rufus from Philadelphia, another stop on a busy tour.

"Everybody was pretty much in agreement that we're dealing with a legend here. Her material is really some of the greatest music written in any era. She's one of the great songwriters, so Martha and I feel very fortunate to have that legacy."

Rufus plans to release a tribute to his mother with his sister and will continue to work with the cancer charity his mum set up, the Kate McGarrigle Fund. Then he might find time for a break to reflect and grieve.

"I made the instinctive decision to just work my ass off immediately after she died, as much as possible," he says, "in order to both move on and also not think too much about it."

"I've been working a lot which I think is a good way to begin this process (of grieving), but I know that at a certain point I'm going to have to stop and absorb the shock, and I've chosen to do that after Christmas. I'm taking a good six months off at least, but work seems to definitely be the order of the day as soon as she passed away. It was a good way to get out there and get to point B basically."

Rufus first learnt of his mother's battle with sarcoma in 2006. He was happy she was able to attend

the premiere of his first opera, *Prima Donna*, which debuted in Manchester in June last year. Rufus attended the premiere with his partner, Jorn Weisbrodt, dressed as Verdi and Puccini.

The details can be seen in a "making of" DVD, which has many insightful and delightful interviews including with his mother and father, Loudon Wainwright III, and amusing footage of the young Rufus and his cousins acting out famous operas at home.

While other kids developed an early appetite for pop, Wainwright was drawn to the drama of opera records in his mother's collection.

While flamboyance may have been the order of the day in recent times – from his guest-studded showboat record *Release the Stars* to his lipstick and tights tribute to Judy Garland's concert at Carnegie Hall – his latest album is a pared-back affair.

All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu, his sixth album, was released in March. Rather than sweeping orchestral arrangements, this record features Rufus solo at the piano.

As well as the personal pieces, such as *Martha*, a missive to his sister which contains lines about visiting their mother, or *Zebulon*, which references their mum being in hospital, there are also adaptations of Shakespearean sonnets, which rose from a project during Rufus's stay as artist-in-residence at the Brecht Theatre in Berlin. *All Days Are Nights* is a line from a Shakespeare poem.



Works from that album will make up the first half of his performance in Australia in October.

The shows will be performed in stages of dark and light.

The first half features expressive visuals by Douglas Gordon and a costume by Rufus's friend Zaldy Goco, who designs for Lady Gaga.

"It's very dark, very morose, very intense, very emotional, but also somewhat severe," says Rufus. "I request that there's no applause during that section; it's basically me in mourning for my mother's death. So I do that for the first half, it's a real trip.

"And the second half, I come out and I'm in a much cheerier outfit and with candles and so forth and I sing all the old fun songs and we have a party. So

but it was because the language was beautiful and so poetic and crystalline – it really moved me. It was a minefield in a way," he laughs.

For now, Rufus will keep diving into the music he loves.

On August 28 he will be performing a special outdoor benefit show with Kylie Minogue in New York, something he is very much looking forward to.

Then, in November, he will premiere a song cycle of five Shakespearean sonnets. He has been presented with offers to work on other operas, too.

"I intend to take one on at some point, but before then I'd like to concentrate a little bit more on my pop career because I've really put that on hold and I'm still, you know, worth looking at," he jokes.

It's very dark, very morose, very intense, very emotional, but also somewhat severe

it's sort of the yin and yang of my existence and the piano is the root of that. It's the core.

"I don't want to be cracking jokes and pretending it's a throwaway event," he adds. "I do take it very seriously. So that's the idea."

Rufus can't predict where the emotional sting might be during a performance.

"I think grief of this magnitude is so insipid that it hits you when you least expect it, most of the time, and also when you most expect it – it's kind of double whammy. For instance, one night I was doing a show, and I started crying during the Shakespeare sonnet, not so much because I related to them,

Meanwhile, his mum is never far from his thoughts.

"I do dream about my mother," he says, "and you know, it was a little bit of an eerie dream. It's us all in the country together, acting as if everything's fine. And Kate's there and Martha's there, and we're all having this lovely afternoon and as the sun sets we realise Kate has to go because she's dead."

He laughs softly. "But she's there with us, and it's this strange thing of, 'But wait, you're here in the kitchen peeling potatoes but you have to leave.' It's pretty intense."

Rufus Wainwright performs at QPAC's Concert Hall on October 15, Qtix 136 246.

CD REVIEWS

POP

Modern Day Addiction
Clare Bowditch and the New Slang
(Island)

★★★★★



With three albums and a swag of EPs of acclaimed folk under her belt, the change of musical direction is slightly surprising for Clare Bowditch but makes perfect sense and is a delight from the get-go. *Modern Day Addiction* takes aim squarely at the 21st century afflictions such as peer pressure, the pursuit of the unattainable quick fix and rampant consumerism. Inspired by a cheesy old Casio synth, Bowditch, collaborator/partner Marty Brown and her new band, with the help of producers Mocky (Fiest) and Mick Harvey, have veered away from her acoustic, rootsy beginnings to embrace choppy guitars, skittering drums and some spectacular vocal arrangements for her three gifted back-up singers Sal, Rach and Belle. Bowditch isn't judging, rather musing from the view of a concerned parent (*Lucky Life*), a grateful daughter (*A Little History*) and a spurned lover (*The Most Beautiful Life*).

James Wigney

INDIE

Barb

Barb
(Liberation)

★★★★★



Barb's self-titled debut is weird. Fantastically weird. Opening with a four-year-old's obsessive ode to "fancy actor" Leonardo Di Caprio, it proves these

New Zealanders do not waste time affirming their originality. Saturated in kooky melodies, wonderful voice layering and eerie sound effects (including breathing and birds twittering) *Barb* is the creation of five inventive personalities, including NZ indie favourite Liam Finn, jamming in a studio for a month. From the ponderous *Time to Contemplate*, to the psychedelic pop vibe of *Martin XII* and the instrumental number *Characterful*, there's an imaginative skill that makes this album a great one.

Anna Rodway

ROCK 'N' ROLL

Tin Can Trust

Los Lobos
(Shout)

★★★★★



When did Los Lobos form? If your answer is around the time of *La Bamba* you are out by 14 years. This crew has been making music together for 37 years, 26 with this line-up. With that in mind, the easy interplay and the unfussed production is more readily understood. While the work of producers such as Joe Henry, T-Bone Burnett (who helmed Los Lobos's major label debut) and Rick Rubin is to be admired, *Tin Can Trust* has the feel of a record made in someone's lounge. But the musicianship and songwriting are right out of the top drawer. Lyrics provide the light and shade here. Guitarists David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas rip it up on the instrumental *Do the Murray* and the blues rock *All My Bridges Burning*. Hidalgo and drummer Louie Perez combine to write six of the 11 tracks. Rosas contributes the two Spanish-language tracks and hooks up with Robert Hunter for *All My Bridges Burning*.

Henry Lyall

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